

TRANSFORMATION'S UNCONTESTED TRUTHS

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Much of the literature concerning military transformation in the United States employs a number of popular, but hitherto unchallenged clichés. Unfortunately, when phrases are repeated frequently enough, they begin to sound true. In policy circles, where haste is often by necessity the order of the day, that poor basis can suffice to justify any number of decisions. Clichés and catchwords are merely handy ways of capturing and conveying truths; they may reveal a lack of imagination on the part of the user, but they are hardly dangerous. Unsubstantiated clichés, however, are another matter. They can masquerade as truths and, unless exposed in time, ultimately prove costly and harmful to policy. Here are five of the more popular clichés, or myths, found in transformation literature today, which are essentially baseless. Only by regularly challenging the many “truths” we take for granted can we avoid wasting ever-scarce resources, and keep our military transformation on course.

The first cliché is that military transformation is about changing to be better prepared for *the* future, as if we could somehow separate the future from our current agendas, and as if we had only one future for which to prepare. In fact, transformation is more about the present than the future. We can only imagine tomorrow through the lenses we have available today; the future is just as distorted by our biases and perspectives as is the past or the present. In effect, the future is always plural, never singular. Each future will depend, as it must, on the tools, skills, and biases of the individual forecasters. Yet, if forecasting the future is always affected by the present, the influences of the present are not always bad. Without biases, much of the information we receive would remain unintelligible. What we need, then, are the means and the willingness to recognize our biases, and to test them—to filter our filters.

The second cliché is that strategic uncertainty is greater today than it was during the Cold War. Unfortunately, this view overstates the level of certainty that existed then, while also exaggerating the amount of uncertainty in evidence today. We should not forget the amount of uncertainty that clouded conflicts in Korea, Indochina, the Middle East, and northern Africa, as well as the invasion of Hungary in 1956, the Cuban missile crisis of 1963, the Munich crisis of 1972, the Suez crisis of 1973, as well as the many tense moments that attended the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today's uncertainty may be qualitatively different, but we can hardly maintain that it is greater than that which obtained during the Cold War. We should also not forget that what seems conventional wisdom now—the idea that a nuclear war would be suicidal—was actually contested then by prominent and influential thinkers such as Herman Kahn. In short, because we know the outcome of the Cold War, we find it easier to believe the degree of uncertainty that existed during it was somehow less than it probably was.

As for today's threats, we actually know a great deal about them, especially of transnational terrorism, which has been under serious study for some time. Recent works by Peter Bergen, Marc Sageman, Michael Scheuer, Bruce Hoffman, Stephen Ulph, and many others, have added, and continue to add, to our wealth of knowledge. To this list, we must include the many classified reports which have also contributed to our knowledge of terrorism in general, and of specific terrorist groups. We know the demographics of these groups, their pathologies, the

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values they hold, their goals, the conditions they need for success, their sources of support, their methods, even though they continue to change, and in many cases their structures and inner-workings, even though the experts themselves do not always agree. Higher levels of knowledge appreciate conflicting points of view, and seek to fit those views together into a larger mosaic.

The third cliché is that mental transformation is the most difficult part of any effort to change. Actually, the most difficult part of transformation is the complex task of managing the change itself. The ideas behind Gustavus Adolphus' reform of the Swedish military during the seventeenth century—which included mobile artillery and greater use of musketry—were not hard to grasp. Likewise, Napoleon's tactical and operational innovations—which involved combining mass and firepower with self-sufficient army organizations called corps—were not difficult to understand. Nor were the concepts implemented by the German military—which stressed speed of movement and decentralized decision-making—difficult to comprehend.

If organizations appear reluctant to embrace new ideas, the fault might lie with the basic ideas themselves. Proponents of change are not immune to seductive, but ultimately vacuous, theories or jargon. Within the business community the rage of the 1990s was to transform to become more networked, flatter, and more agile and flexible. Hierarchies and stovepipes were to be demolished, and a premium was to be put on lateral information sharing. Such changes were to enable companies to “self-organize” in innovative ways to accomplish tasks more effectively, and more efficiently. However, recent observations show that many companies which were once models of revolutionary change have come to grief: Enron, WorldCom, Vivendi, AOL Time Warner, Qwest, Global Crossing, Sunbeam, British Telecom, Marconi, Tyco, and AT&T. While the reasons for failure vary, an acceptance of “digital jargon” without rigorous, critical analysis was a common factor. It might pay to examine the emperor’s new clothes before deciding to change the fashion line.

In fact, the truly hard part about change is *managing* the change. That requires backing up vague visions and lofty goals with concrete programs that can provide meaningful resources for new roles and functions, and offering incentives or compensation packages capable of appeasing institutional interests, especially the specific interests of those groups or communities most threatened by change.

The forth cliché is that imagination and creative thinking are critical for any successful transformation. While these qualities are certainly important, they are only vital when the effort is open-ended, or in its early stages. Once the transformation effort gains momentum, a new orthodoxy replaces the old one, and creative thinking, unless it remains “in the box,” becomes inconvenient. To be sure, creative thinking can generate a wealth of potential solutions to the practical problems and the incidental friction that come with implementing change. However, it is the next step, the critical analysis of those solutions, the examination of their feasibility, that is absolutely essential to moving forward. The only truly essential key to transforming successfully is the capacity for critical analysis. Critical thinking also enables us to challenge clichés and assumptions, to expose vacuous theories and seductive jargon, and, in theory at least, to assess the results of war games and other exercises impartially. The desire to change an organization thoroughly and rapidly can render it vulnerable to seductive theories. The purpose of critical thinking is to strip away the allure. Critical thinking also assists us in identifying signposts, which in turn are essential in enabling an organization to hedge its bets about how the future will unfold. Signposts in the form of political, social, and technological developments can indicate whether an organization’s assumptions remain valid. They can serve as decision points, which

require policymakers to take hedging or shaping actions; the former minimize the damage of failed assumptions, while the latter help us to prevent the assumption from failing in the first place.

Finally, the last cliché is that militaries tend to transform slowly, or not at all, because they like to “refight the last war,” rather than preparing for the next one. While militaries tend to rely on historical models almost to a fault, organizations need to learn from their experiences; this is particularly true of organizations that lay claim to the status of professions. Such organizations, according to current theory, must cultivate a corpus of knowledge, usually historically derived, which the members of the profession must master to qualify as professionals. To be sure, at some point looking backward prevents looking ahead. Yet, to suggest militaries should not examine the lessons from the last war implies they should not learn from their pasts. History does not necessarily occur in cycles. So, failure to learn from the past does not necessarily condemn one to repeat it, or to fail in the future. Yet, an organization that cannot, or will not, learn from its past is not likely to prepare itself very well for the future either, except by chance. Assessing what worked and what did not from historical data is integral to critical analysis. Learning from the past and preparing for the future require an ability to evaluate events as rigorously and objectively as possible. The study of history, perhaps more than any other discipline, can help develop the requisite critical thinking skills which underpin these abilities.

Admittedly, readers can easily find more than five such catchwords or myths running through today’s transformation literature. However, the purpose here is not to address every particular cliché, but rather to point out the need to challenge accepted “truths.

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